

The Male Student Success Initiative

Investing in the Success of Men of Color

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"If somebody is missing in class or something, we hit each other up like, 'Hey, how are you doing in class? Hey, is everything all right?' Just checking up on everybody, making sure that everybody okay."

-A student describing the brotherhood among program members

"They taught us how to tie a tie ... and they let us keep the ties ... so now I got a tie at the crib, 'cause I didn't really have that many ties."

-A student describing the support mentors offer program members

OVERVIEW

A community of belonging. A space to build relationships. The opportunity to have one's success affirmed. These are qualities of many programs targeting men of color that have become fixtures in recent years at colleges and universities around the United States.

The Male Student Success Initiative (MSSI) is a five-year-old program at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) designed to support male students of color throughout their academic journey, leading ultimately to graduation or transfers to four-year institutions. Research to date indicates that inadequate social, emotional, and campus support can make it harder for men of color to complete degrees, as can insufficient preparation or personal challenges outside of academic work.¹

Heightened attention to the college persistence and graduation rates of men of color over the last 15 to 20 years has fueled a movement of college administrators, student leaders, faculty members, and post-secondary researchers who have worked to change narratives for men of color, in particular the narrative centered on their deficits rather than their achievements.² This movement is grounded in an understanding that men of color bring a variety of assets to college that shine in a supportive community with strong peer and mentoring relationships.

MDRC is conducting an efficacy evaluation of MSSI's program model through its Men of Color College Achievement (MoCCA) Project. MoCCA began by partnering with CCBC to support program model refinements aligned with empirical research findings and has now moved into an evaluation phase.

THE MSSI PROGRAM MODEL

Like many existing and emerging programs, MSSI's primary goal is to improve the college persistence and graduation rates of men of color. The program's current approach seeks to foster a community of men of color at CCBC by (1) offering a college orientation course taught by men of color that responds to students' cultural context; (2) pairing each student with a success mentor/coach who is also a man of color; (3) providing individual referrals to on-campus student support services; and (4) bringing students to workshops, conferences, and college visits focused on leadership and career preparation.

Each of these program features is rooted in empirical research into the factors that support the success of students who are men of color.³



SUCCESS MENTORS

What makes Success Mentors stand out from other advisers on campus is their relatability as men of color. Some Success Mentors are alumni of the college who can provide firsthand advice about navigating the first year at CCBC. Success mentors meet with students at critical points in the semester and provide academic and social-emotional support, quickly building rapport with students. Success Mentors function as “campus connectors” who help students make use of various college resources and support services. For example, students have revealed in focus groups that Success Mentors help them navigate financial aid and other campus services in ways the students could not have figured out alone. MSSI students have said consistently that they feel comfortable disclosing academic and life challenges to their Success Mentors that they would not have shared with other college staff members.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH

Currently, MSSI is linked to a version of the college's orientation and student success course, Academic Development 101, that is designed to respond to students' cultural context.⁴ The course teaches students academic and study skills, as well as college knowledge they need for academic success and integration into campus life. The male faculty members of color who teach the course have received specialized training in culturally responsive teaching and work to engage students by making learning relevant, all while affirming students' cultural identities in the classroom. Research has demonstrated that classroom curricula, reading materials, and assignments that reflect students' cultural experiences result in deeper student engagement and learning.⁵ Other studies find that culturally responsive approaches may have improved student persistence, classroom attendance, and interest in school.⁶

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES REFERRALS

Success Mentors assume the responsibility of connecting men of color to opportunities and resources such as counseling, financial aid, and tutoring to set them up for personal and academic success. One student shared several examples about how his mentor directed him to the support services he needed regularly. The student noted, “So if I've got a problem, I'll talk to him, and he'll forward me to the right place or let me know what resources that he has because it's really each one teach one.” In this reflection, the student is taking on the responsibility of learning and navigating student services not just for his own benefit, but to be able to teach someone else about what he has learned. MSSI reinforces this principle.

► COMMUNITY AND BROTHERHOOD

The presence and engagement of Success Mentors who are men of color is intended to help MSSI students see themselves in leadership and professional roles. Having teachers of color in the classrooms promotes a positive cultural identity for men of color. Additionally, some research shows that educators of color tend to have higher expectations of students of color, helping mitigate the harmful effects of “stereotype threat”: the negative consequences that ensue when the idea is projected onto men of color that they are incapable of succeeding in college.⁷ MSSI participants also have group meetings where they can talk about the issues they are experiencing and solve problems together.

► PROFESSIONAL AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

MSSI plans several professional and leadership activities for its students each academic year. Every month, MSSI gathers its students for a meeting that includes a professional panel discussion or workshop on a professional or leadership topic. Every fall, the MSSI participants attend a statewide conference that brings together male students of color from all parts of the state to hear inspirational speakers and engage in leadership and professional development workshops. Over the course of an academic year, MSSI takes its students on visits to four-year colleges.

THE MEN OF COLOR COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT PROJECT

With funding from the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) and the W.T. Grant Foundation, MoCCA will measure the effects of the MSSI program on the persistence and degree completion of men of color using a randomized controlled trial. Students will be randomly assigned to a program group with access to MSSI or to a control group with access to all other existing college services for which they are eligible. The outcomes shown below will be analyzed and compared for both research groups to determine if there are significant differences that can be attributed to the MSSI program, which will be considered the program’s effects on academic outcomes.

The early stages of the project were used to help MSSI strengthen its model and align it with the existing evidence on effective student success strategies. Thus, the findings from this study will also reflect any improvements that happen as a result of the technical assistance MDRC provides, along with any other advice based on interim observations that MDRC provides to MSSI as the evaluation is in progress.

Using a mixed-methods approach, MoCCA will capture student experiences through a study of the program’s implementation, a qualitative “student voices” study, and a student survey. Several focus groups will be conducted from the fall of 2019 through the fall of 2020 as part of the student voices study to reveal the strengths and assets men of color bring to college as well as the barriers that potentially inhibit their success. The student survey will be administered to program and control group students to determine the services they use on campus. The study will also include faculty and staff interviews as well as classroom observations to provide researchers with a full understanding of the program’s implementation.

Student Outcomes MoCCA is Examining

Retention and Persistence	Credit Accumulation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Retention in the first semester and first yearPersistence beyond the first year	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Number of credits earned
Grade Point Average	Completion and Transfer
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Semester grade point averageCumulative grade point average	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Graduation within three years at a two-year institution or six years at a four-year institutionTransfers to other institutions

Finally, researchers will collect information on the costs of operating MSSI. Such evidence is needed to help bring programs like MSSI to a larger scale.

MOCCA PROJECT TIMELINE

- MoCCA will enroll students into the research sample in the fall of 2019, spring of 2020, and fall of 2020.
- MDRC will release three publications with MoCCA findings within the next two years. A policy brief in the fall of 2020 will contain findings from the implementation study and the student voices study. Then, near the end of 2021, MDRC will release a final project report. In early 2022, MDRC plans to publish an article in a peer-reviewed journal.
- MoCCA also plans to share findings through the [College Completion Network](#), a network of postsecondary researchers contributing to the existing evidence base on college completion and postsecondary success.

To learn more visit www.mdrc.org/project/men-color-college-achievement-mocca-project or go to www.mdrc.org/subscribe-updates to be added to MDRC's mailing list and receive updates when new MoCCA publications are released. For more information about MSSI visit www.ccbcmd.edu/Campus-Life-and-Activities/Male-Student-Success.aspx.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006); Bailey, Jeong, and Cho (2010); Palmer, Davis, Moore, and Hilton (2010); Steele and Aronson (1995); Harper and Harris (2012); Harper (2014).
- 2 For more information about focusing on strengths rather than deficits, see Harper (2014).
- 3 Museus (2014); Harris and Wood (2013); Truscello, Coleman, and Stone (2014); Ladson-Billings (1995); Gardenhire and Cerna (2016).
- 4 While MSSI is currently linked with Academic Development 101, in future semesters MSSI may become available with other culturally responsive courses.
- 5 Ladson-Billings (1995); Gay (2002); Tatum (2008).
- 6 Byrd (2016).
- 7 Steele and Aronson (1995).

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